

Lewis E. Lehrman: Op-Ed: Election of 1816: The Virginia Succession

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Editor's note: In this presidential year, this is the third of four pieces by Greenwich's Lewis E. Lehrman that will look at notable presidential elections from our history.

In 1816, Secretary of State James Monroe was the logical successor to President James Madison. Like Madison, he had served as secretary of state. Like Madison, he was a close friend and protégé of Thomas Jefferson. Like Madison and Jefferson, he was from Virginia. He had a great resume -- in addition to secretary of state, he had served as secretary of war under the Madison administration.

Madison and Monroe had been rivals in the 1808 election. The adversaries would not resume their personal and political relationship until 1810, when Monroe delivered a speech crafted to repair his relations with the political forces in Washington and Richmond that had not forgiven his apostasy in 1808.

"I shall ever be ready to support the administration whilst I think it acts with propriety," said Monroe. "I am confident that you would not wish me to support it when it acts improperly. Mr. Madison is a Republican and so am I. As long as he acts in consistence with the interests of his country, I will go along with him. When otherwise, you cannot wish me to countenance him."

Madison and Monroe began a delicate dance to determine if Monroe, once again governor of Virginia, would be willing to move to Washington and become secretary of state. After Madison appeased Monroe's sensitivity to criticism of his past diplomatic conduct, Monroe accepted. In so doing, he positioned himself to play critical roles in the War of 1812 and to succeed Madison in 1817 as the nation's third president from the Old Dominion.

But therein was the problem. Not everyone was enthralled with the idea that the third president in a row should come from Virginia. That would mean four of the first five chief executives would hail from that state. One Massachusetts senator had complained in 1813 that "for these twelve years past the whole affairs of this country have been managed, and its fortunes reversed, under the influence of a cabinet little less than despotic, composed to all efficient purposes, of two Virginians and a foreigner (Albert Gallatin -- a Swiss immigrant)."

The problem was not with the Republican (later to be called the Democratic) Party to which Jefferson, Madison and Monroe belonged. There was no real opposition party. The problem was that the Republican Party was a loose amalgam of groups organized by state around individual personalities. Even within Virginia, there was opposition among those who considered Monroe insufficiently orthodox on the limits of the national government.

During the Madison administration, Monroe had served as both secretary of state and secretary of war -- sometimes both at the same time. But when he finally left the War Department, it was taken over by Georgia's William H. Crawford. As was their practice, Democratic-Republicans met to select their presidential candidate in the U.S. Capitol on March 12, 1816. Crawford supporters predominated, but only 58 of the party's 141 members attended. When a second meeting was held on March 16, Monroe's supporters outnumbered Crawford supporters by a margin of 65-54.

Unrest with the presidential caucus nominating system was growing, however. Candidates understood that they needed to curry favor with senators and congressmen who effectively were the party superdelegates of their time. Monroe prevailed as the successor to Madison. Without a strong Federalist opponent, then, Monroe easily won election for the first of his two terms as president.

Once nicknamed the "mother of presidents," Virginia's presidential ascendancy peaked with Monroe's election. Four more presidents would boast a Virginia birthplace -- William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor and Woodrow Wilson. (Abraham Lincoln's grandfather was born in Virginia.) Only Tyler, however, would be a resident of the state when he assumed the presidency. Because Ohio's William Henry Harrison died shortly after taking office, Vice President Tyler succeeded him. With the election of James Monroe, the Virginia ascendancy gradually declined in the Union; and so did the predominance of the slave-holding South.

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